

**NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
SOUTHEAST REGION**

NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA INCREASES COMMITMENT TO HALT INTERNATIONAL POACHING AND IMPORTATION OF ILLEGAL SEAFOOD

Dalton Announces Partnerships to Stop Smuggling

Assistant Administrator for Fisheries Penny Dalton today announced that NOAA is strengthening law enforcement agreements with natural resource organizations across the United States to halt international poaching and illegal imports of seafood. The announcement follows recent federal felony convictions of three American seafood dealers and a Honduran lobster fleet owner from an investigation by NOAA Fisheries' Office for Law Enforcement and other federal agencies.

"NOAA is committed to pursue and convict anyone who markets illegally harvested seafood in the United States," said Dalton. "We must not allow poachers seeking illegal profits to destroy a valuable renewable resource."

"We are working with Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to enhance seafood inspection programs at several key Florida ports of entry. NOAA's criminal investigators are implementing similar partnerships throughout the nation to shut down international poaching rings that attempt to market their stolen seafood products in this country. Those measures will include close monitoring of species caught with illegal gear, species caught using techniques that are detrimental to the environment, and species caught in violation of the United States' and other countries' fishery laws," said Dalton.

NOAA Fisheries' Office for Law Enforcement special agents, supported by agents from the FBI, Internal Revenue Service, and officials from the Honduran government, headed an investigation which led to 101 charges against four people who illegally engaged in an international seafood poaching scheme that involved millions of dollars and tons of illegally harvested spiny lobster that were smuggled into the United States. The Southern Alabama U.S. Attorney's Office successfully prosecuted the case with the assistance of the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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"The overwhelming evidence against David Henson McNab revealed that he was the ringleader of a smuggling operation that adversely impacted the lobster population in the Caribbean basin. Thirty-one of the felony convictions were against him," said Dale Jones, Chief of NOAA Fisheries' Office for Law Enforcement. Also convicted were three U.S. importers who bought McNab's illegal lobster: Abner Schoenwetter of Miami; Robert Blandford of Coral Springs, Fla.; and Diane Huang of Newark, N.J.

The convictions include multiple counts of smuggling, federal wildlife and fisheries violations, conspiracy, and money laundering and carry maximum penalties of five to 10 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000, or twice the value of the defendants' gain. The lobster tails had a wholesale value of more than \$4 million. Sentencing is scheduled for March 2, 2001 for Blandford and Huang, and March 16, 2001 for McNab and Schoenwetter. The defendants are also required to pay forfeiture penalties as follows: McNab, \$800,000; Blandford, \$100,000; and Schoenwetter, \$100,000.

McNab operated his business from Roatan Island, located off the northern coast of Honduras. Roatan Island and the surrounding waters of the Caribbean were the hunting ground for McNab's fleet of vessels, each of which can deploy thousands of lobster traps.

The investigation demonstrates that poaching can adversely affect the lives of hundreds of fishermen and have a profoundly detrimental impact on the environment. McNab evidenced no concern for the lobster resource or for fishermen. For example:

- The wealth from McNab's vast harvest was denied to the common citizens of Honduras. McNab paid the harvesters 10 cents per pound of lobster, which subsequently wholesaled in the United States for \$10 to \$18 per pound.
- McNab's workers harvested spiny lobster that were under the legal size limits set by Honduras and the United States. NOAA investigators and federal prosecutors, in cooperation with Honduran authorities, proved that Blandford, Schoenwetter, Huang, and their seafood corporations were conspiring to sell hundreds of thousands of pounds of undersized lobster tails.
- McNab's employees illegally harvested thousands of pounds of egg-bearing female lobsters, an activity they tried to conceal by clipping off parts of the animals' tails to which eggs were attached. Scientists who study spiny lobster populations have long recognized that the offspring of lobster populations off the Western Caribbean coast, including Honduras, are critical sources for replenishing the lobster stocks in the Southeastern United States.
- McNab's fishing practices did not adhere to Honduran lobster fishing laws. His fleet conducted fishing operations that removed virtually every lobster from the sea floor.

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NOAA Fisheries urges citizens to report fishery violations during weekly business hours of 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Eastern, to its Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends at its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov> or NOAA's Internet home page, <http://www.noaa.gov/public-affairs/press2000.html>.

NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency conducts scientific research and provides services and products to support fisheries management, fisheries development, trade, and industry assistance, enforcement, and protected species and habitat conservation programs.

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